

**TEN LAKES WILDERNESS STUDY AREA
WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTIC ASSESSMENT
KOOTENAI NATIONAL FOREST**

JANUARY 2003

INTRODUCTION

The Montana Wilderness Study Act of 1977 (PL 95-150) (MWSA) required the study of certain lands to determine their suitability for designation as wilderness in accordance with the Wilderness Act of 1964. One of the areas identified in the Act was the 34,200-acre Ten Lakes Wilderness Study Area (WSA). After eight years of study, analysis, and evaluation of public comments, the Ten Lakes Final Report and Proposal was completed in early 1985. This report was the administrative recommendation to Congress for the land allocation and management of the area. The report recommended 26,000 acres, or approximately 76%, as wilderness. Of the remaining acres, 5,300 acres, or 16% of the total, was recommended for roadless management and 2,900 acres, or 8% of the total, to be managed for development. Congress never acted on the recommendations contained in the Report and Proposal.

Language in the 1977 Act required that the areas be managed to maintain their presently existing wilderness character and potential for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System. In 1996 the Montana Wilderness Association (MWA) filed a complaint that this part of the Act had been violated, in particular that the current level of use exceeds the level of use in 1977. The Forest Service was directed to analyze the current level of use and conditions with the level of use and conditions that existed when the act was passed.

BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

Recreational use of the Ten Lakes area was well established by 1960. This included both motorized and non-motorized activities. On May 4, 1964 the Regional Forester established the Ten Lakes Scenic Area under Regulation U-3. This 6,500-acre area lies totally within the boundaries of the Ten Lakes Wilderness Study Area and comprises about 18% of the WSA. On August 26, 1966 the Scenic Area was closed to motorized equipment. This was identified in the order to include "... motor vehicles, motorized equipment, motorboats, aircraft (fixed wing and helicopter) landings and dropping of material, supplies, or persons ...". There were no restrictions on the established recreational use for the rest of the area that would become the Ten Lakes WSA.

Multiple Use planning occurred on the Kootenai Forest in the 1970's. The Eureka – Grave Creek Planning Unit covered 93,600 acres in the northeast corner of the Forest and

included the area that would be identified as the Ten Lakes WSA. The Final Environmental Statement (FEIS) was signed on April 2, 1975. This document provided guidance, direction, and coordination for all management activities within the Planning Unit. It established the benchmark of comprehensive management activities that were in place in 1977 and against which the existing wilderness character is evaluated. For recreational use and opportunities in the WSA, the document did four things:

1. Modified the 1966 order in the Ten Lakes Scenic Area by stating that snowmobile use “will be permitted during the period December 1 to April 15.” Motorized equipment was restricted as stated in item 3 below. The request to change the 1966 closure order was signed on March 8, 1976.
2. For the entire area that would become the Ten Lakes WSA, allowed snowmobiles on 99.5% of the area. The 0.5% was on scattered wildlife range at low elevations along the western WSA boundary. The December 1 to April 15 date listed in item 1 above applied to much, but not all, of the area. Prior to this FEIS, snowmobiling was allowed on 82% of the area.
3. Prohibited all other motorized recreation on 55% of the area that would become the Ten Lakes WSA. The use of motorized (mechanized) equipment would “... only be permitted when authorized specifically by the Forest Service for such purposes as trail maintenance, trail construction, or prospecting.” Prior to this FEIS, 18% of the area was closed to other motorized recreation.
4. Did not restrict any non-motorized recreational use or opportunities.

Congress passed the Montana Wilderness Study Act on January 4, 1977. The Final Report and Proposal for the Ten Lake Wilderness Study Area (WSA) was released in 1985. Because the report was never approved, it did not change the management direction approved in the Eureka – Grave Creek Planning Unit FEIS. Recommendations documented in the Final Report were used to develop Management Area 9 in the Kootenai Forest Plan. The Forest Plan was approved in September 1987.

Management Area 9 recognized that snowmobiles were presently permitted within the Ten Lakes WSA. Use could continue unless it was determined to conflict with grizzly bear management or other wildlife standards. The assumption in 1987 was snowmobile use would not be allowed in any part of the management area that Congress designated as Wilderness. Except for snowmobiles, the Management Area was to be managed for roadless non-motorized forms of recreation. This restricted all other forms of motorized recreation from the Ten Lakes WSA.

Between June 1984 and June 1993, ten Bills were introduced into Congress to designate all or part of the Ten Lakes WSA as Wilderness. None of the Bills were passed.

RECREATIONAL USE RECORDS

Good use records for the Ten Lakes WSA do not exist for 1977 when the act was passed or for 1996 when MWA filed their complaint.

Recreational analysis for the 93,600-acre Eureka – Grave Creek Planning Unit, which includes the area that became the Ten Lakes WSA, estimated 630 people visited the planning unit each week from July 4 through Labor Day in 1974. Campgrounds at both Therriault Lakes already existed. Total recreational use for 1974 in the planning unit was estimated at 32,317 visitor days¹. Of this total, 6432 was specifically motorized (driving for pleasure, snowmobiling, etc.) and 2674 was non-motorized (hiking and stock riding). The remaining 22,211 could be either (hunting, fishing, camping, etc.). Snowmobiling was estimated at 1880 visitor days and hiking at 1959 days. This equates to 627 recreational visitor days¹ (RVD) and 653 RVD's respectively. Snowmobiles would have accounted for approximately 6% of the total use. The FEIS did not estimate use for the area that would become the Ten Lakes WSA.

The draft report for the Ten Lakes WSA, released in 1982, stated that the study area and the immediate vicinity (including the Therriault campgrounds) received much visitor use. Estimated recreational use for the study and adjacent area was 9,200 visitor days in 1976, 13,600 visitor days in 1978, and 16,700 visitor days in 1981. Much of the use was in the form of non-motorized dispersed recreation. Snowmobiling was recognized as being permitted in the area and that this form of use was increasing.

The final report for Ten Lakes, released in 1985, estimated 14,900 RVD's of recreational use within the WSA. Use consisted primarily of hiking, nature photography, cross-country skiing, and snowmobiling. There was no break down of estimated actual use by motorized and non-motorized activities. However, the proposed outputs for the selected action included 13,000 RVD's of wilderness recreation, 1,200 RVD's of non-motorized recreation, and 1,300 RVD's of snowmobiling for a total of 15,500 RVD's. Snowmobiling was 8% of the proposed output.

A recreation report in 1987-1989 provided use levels for certain recreational activities in the Ten Lakes Scenic Area and proposed Wilderness. This is likely for the proposed wilderness identified in the Forest Plan, which covered 26,000 acres of the WSA and 7,000 acres outside the WSA. Snowmobiling was estimated at 1400 RVD's in 1987, and 1000 RVD's in 1989. Hiking and horse riding was estimated at 4300 RVD's in 1987 and 6500 RVD's in 1989. Snowmobiling was estimated to be 5-9% of the total recreational use and hiking and horse riding combined at 20-35% of the total.

¹ The Eureka – Grave Creek Planning Unit FEIS estimated recreational use in visitor days. The rest of the documents used recreation visitor days (RVD). A visitor day is someone recreating on the National Forest for some part of the day. A RVD is recreation that occurs over a 12-hour period by one or more people. For example, a person hiking for six hours is one visitor day but 1/2 RVD; two people hiking for six hours is two visitor days but one RVD. For purposes of this assessment, the visitor days were converted to RVD's for easier comparison. The conversion factor used to convert visitor days to RVD's vary with the recreational activity. For both hiking and snowmobiling, the conversion factor is three visitor days equal one RVD.

A report showing only snowmobile use was prepared in 1993-1995. For the Ten Lakes WSA, snowmobiles used 1450 RVD's in 1993, 3150 RVD's in 1994, and 3150 RVD's in 1995.

Accurate snowmobile counts were attempted in the early to mid 1990's with the use of traffic pneumatic and inferred counters. Neither of these counters proved to be useful in providing any accurate vehicle counts.

A National Visitor Use Study conducted on the Kootenai Forest in 2001 – 2002 interviewed 43 snowmobilers at the Lower Grave Creek survey site. The survey was conducted on four separate days from January 13, 2002 through March 24, 2002. Each person interviewed was randomly selected from each snowmobiling group. There were a total of 92 people in the 43 snowmobiling groups. An additional 14 groups were observed using the area but declined to participate in the survey. Others may have recreated from the survey site but were not observed by the surveyor. No attempt was made to determine if any of the snowmobilers entered the Ten Lakes WSA.

While good use records are not available, field observations by recreation personnel indicate all recreational use has increased within the WSA during the two decades between 1977 and 1996, except for motorized wheeled vehicles use. Motorized wheeled vehicles, which were allowed on about 45% of the WSA in 1977, have been eliminated. Some new uses, such as mountain biking, have started. All of the records listed above indicate that snowmobiles comprised about 5-9% of the total recreational use. They were the highest single winter use in 1977 and remain so today.

Subjectively, all recreational use could have doubled within the WSA during those two decades. This is not unrealistic for the Kootenai Forest and is similar to the perceived increase experienced in the Cabinet Mountains Wilderness. Snowmobile use is believed to have increased faster than some of the other uses but there is no indication that snowmobile use within the WSA currently exceeds 10% of the total use.

WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS ASSESSMENT

Forest Service was directed to evaluate the changes in wilderness characteristics between 1977 when the act was passed and 1996 when the complaint was filed. The complaint alleged that the wilderness characteristic had not been maintained as required by the Act. The Wilderness Attribute Rating System (WARS) that was in place in 1977 was used to evaluate this section.

Natural Integrity

Natural integrity is the extent to which long-term ecological processes are intact and functioning. Things consider include fire suppression, introduction of exotic species, and changes to air and water quality.

The natural integrity has not changed in the past two decades. Fire suppression tactics have not changed significantly since the 1940's although advancements in technology have provided more effective and efficient equipment. The use of mechanized equipment, such as a dozer, is much more restrictive now than in 1977. The Kootenai Forest Plan requires Forest Supervisor approval for any mechanized equipment for fire suppression. Only about half of the WSA had similar wording in the Eureka – Grave Creek Planning Unit FEIS. All wildfires are suppressed and no prescribed burns have been conducted within the WSA.

Noxious weed infestations at the portals to the Ten Lakes WSA vary from light to moderate but the spread of noxious weeds has been fairly light within the WSA. Spot spraying for weed control has occurred along some roads and at some trailheads. A minor amount of spot spraying has been done along a few trails in the WSA. Biological control has been released near the Green Mountain trailhead.

Air and water quality have not been tested in the WSA but have in the Cabinet Mountains Wilderness. There are no indicators of water quality deterioration in the past two decades. Air quality has shown some improvement due to stricter national and state clean air standards although the amount of improvement is undocumented within the WSA.

Apparent Naturalness

Apparent naturalness considers if the environment looks natural to most people using the area. The area generally needs to appear to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature. Things used for evaluation include structures, improvements such as roads or trails, and any artificial vegetative manipulation such as a timber harvest.

Several structures exist within the WSA including lookout towers on Wam Peak and Stahl Peak. Poorman Mountain lookout was destroyed in 1977 but some evidence may remain. The cabin at Wolverine Lake has been in existence since 1944.

A snotel facility used to record snow depth and precipitation is located just outside the WSA near Stahl Peak. The first reading from the snotel was in 1961. Campground facilities are present at both Therriault Lakes and at Horse Camp. The campgrounds are located outside the WSA and, with the exception of Horse Camp, all facilities were in place in 1977.

There are 16 trails totaling 61 miles in the WSA. Trails are routinely maintained to protect the environment and provide safe passage by users. Currently all trails are closed to motorized vehicles except over the snow vehicles (snowmobiles) and all trailheads are located outside the WSA. In 1977 about 53% of the trail mileage was located in a planning unit that allowed summer, motorized travel.

Several open, drivable roads were located within the WSA in 1977. Most of these roads were constructed prior to 1960 to remove dead or dying timber. In addition, there were a number of roads lying outside but near the WSA boundary. Road restrictions and closures began in 1973. By 1985, roads within the WSA and many in the surrounding area were closed or seasonally restricted. A portion of Road 7077, which enters the WSA at Sinclair Creek, has a seasonal restriction to motorized vehicles.

Removal of dead and dying spruce from a spruce beetle epidemic occurred in the 1950's and 1960's both inside and outside the WSA. Timber harvest continued into the 1970's within the WSA including some clearcuts.

Five patented mining claims existed in the WSA in 1977. These claims dated back to the late 1890's and early 1900's. The government purchased four of the claims between 1980 and 1989. An offer to purchase the remaining claim was not accepted.

The overall natural appearance of the WSA has not changed since 1977 and the area still looks natural to most users except along the WSA boundary where road construction or timber harvested occurred. There have been some impacts and deterioration of specific sites from the increase in visitor use primarily near popular lakes. Almost all of this has been from non-motorized recreational use. Short term, temporary impacts to snow cover occur with skiing and snowmobiling.

Opportunities for Solitude

This involves the isolation from the sights, sounds, and presence of others and human developments. Things to consider include the number of people using the area, the noise associated with that use, and the amount of improved access.

Recreational use on the Kootenai Forest has been steadily increasing since the 1920's. Improved roads and trails allowed more people easier and faster access to the forest for recreational activities. Almost all of the trails in the Ten Lakes WSA were constructed by the mid 1930's. Road access was in place along the western boundary by 1940. The Grave Creek road was constructed to Clarence Creek by the mid 1930's and to Big Therriault Lake in the early 1950's. Big Therriault Campground was developed in 1955.

Little Therriault Campground was developed in 1966 and stock facilities installed at Horse Camp in 1982 to manage the existing and anticipated use that was well established in the Ten Lakes WSA and surrounding area. The established use included both motorized and non-motorized recreational activities.

Grooming of the lower Grave Creek Road from Birch Creek to Clarence Creek and up the Stahl and Clarence Creek Roads began in the fall of 1982. In 1989 the grooming was extended from Clarence Creek up the Graves Creek Road to Big Therriault Lake.

Public pursuit for recreation on the national forest has not diminished and use has continued to increase. With the increase in number of users, there is a greater chance to meet or hear other users. This reduces the opportunity for solitude and the feeling of being alone. In the summer and fall the increase between 1977 and 1996 was in non-motorized use since summer, motorized recreation was eliminated from the Ten Lakes WSA in 1987. During the winter months, both motorized and non-motorized use has increased but it is believed that snowmobile use has increased more than cross-country skiing and snowshoeing. Although none of the groom snow trails lies within the study area, it does provide easier access for all users.

Snowmobilers interviewed in the National Visitor Use Study at Lower Grave Creek in 2002, indicate they had no or very few encounters with other users even on the heaviest survey date (a rating of 1-2 on a scale of 10). This indicates a feeling of solitude by this user group in the area surrounding the WSA even when use levels appear to be high.

The presence of other humans – and thus a lessening of solitude – is felt in the signs that the users leave behind long after they are gone. This includes human and stock impacts around lakes or other popular destination sites and tracks of skiers and snowmobilers in the snow. Tracks in the snow are short term with heavy snowfall or spring snowmelt. The other impacts are more long term.

The opportunity for solitude in the summer remains high for the area. Although the opportunity is reduced somewhat due to the increase in use, it is possible to recreate in the area without seeing another party. During the winter, the opportunity for solitude is still consider high although it has received a greater reduction since snowmobiles are still allowed in the WSA and snowmobile use has increased more than the other uses. Noise from motorized vehicles is more an issue in the winter than in the summer.

Opportunity for Primitive Recreation Experience

This considers the sense of remoteness, closeness to nature, serenity, spirit of adventure, application of woodmen skills, high degree of challenge, and risk. In addition to access and the number of people along with the associated noise considered above, this characteristic considers the type of use and mode of travel.

Recreational opportunities and activities occurring in the Ten Lakes WSA that were identified in the Eureka – Grave Creek Planning Unit FEIS in 1975 and the Ten Lakes

WSA Final Report in 1985 included hunting, fishing, hiking, horse riding, berry picking, camping, picnicking, motorcycling, snowmobiling, nature study, photography, swimming, and cross-country skiing. These include both non-motorized and motorized recreational activities. Mountain biking, snowshoeing, and trapping are also known to exist but were not identified. Motorized summer travel, such as motorcycling, was prohibited on about 45% on the area in 1975 and total eliminated in 1987. There are some time restrictions on when snowmobiling is allowed but none of the other activities are restricted.

Mode of travel is by foot, stock, non-motorized wheel vehicle, motorized wheel vehicle, and motorized track vehicle. Foot travel, including hiking, cross-country skiing and snow shoeing, and horse riding have remained unrestricted and have steadily increased since 1977. There are no records to indicate mountain bikes were present in 1977 but there is a minor amount of biking at the present time. Motorcycles, 4-wheelers, and other motorized wheel vehicles were allowed on about 45% of the WSA in 1977 but were restricted from the entire area in 1987. Snowmobiles were allowed within the WSA in 1977 and that use was permitted to continue.

The opportunity for a primitive recreation experience is high for the entire Ten Lakes WSA during all four seasons and is basically unchanged since 1977. While use has increased, it is still possible to recreate in the WSA without seeing or hearing other people also recreating in the WSA.

APPENDIX A
TIME TABLE SUMMARY

| DATE | DOCUMENT | ACTION |
|-------------|---|---|
| 1964 | Designation under U-3 | Established Ten Lakes Scenic Area, which was located totally within and composed about 18% of what would become the Ten Lakes WSA. |
| 1975 | Eureka – Grave Creek Planning Unit FEIS | Provided guidance, direction, and coordination for all management activities in the area that would become the Ten Lakes WSA. Set the benchmark for approved management of the WSA in 1977. |
| 1977 | Public Law 95-150 | Established Ten Lakes Wilderness Study Area. |
| 1985 | Ten Lakes Final Report and Recommendation | Documented recommendations for land management of Ten Lakes WSA but was never approved. |
| 1987 | Kootenai Forest Plan | Established Management Area 9, which implemented the recommendations from the Ten Lakes Final Report. |
| 1984-1993 | Wilderness Bills | Ten Bills introduced in to Congress to designate part or all of Ten Lakes WSA as wilderness. None were passed. |